DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 022 747 TE 000 487

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CRITICS OUT OF VIDIOTS.
Pub Date Oct 67
Note-5p.
Available from-Media and Methods Institute, Inc., 134 N. 13th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19107 (Subscription $3.00 per year. Single copy $0.40).
Journal Cit-The Teachers Guide to Media and Methods; v4 n2 p33-4, 36-7 Oct 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.28
Descriptors-CRITICAL THINKING, CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT, *DISCUSSION (TEACHING TECHNIQUE), *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, MASS MEDIA, SECONDARY EDUCATION, TEACHING METHODS, TELEVISION, *TELEVISION VIEWING

Students begin to comprehend the medium of television as they learn to make qualitative judgments about what they like in TV viewing and why. To find convincing reasons for their personal responses, they should analyze all kinds of good and bad TV experiences as well as learn to recognize the socio-legal-economic context of TV. As students become more observant and articulate, they not only will demand more of the TV medium and of themselves, but will react more intelligently to other media. They can develop their critical and analytical skills by (1) watching, discussing, and writing about particular programs, (2) writing columns of media criticism for school newspapers, and (3) reading and criticising the professional TV critics--the reviewers, columnists, and such interpretive and aesthetic critics as Gilbert Seldes, John Crosby, Marya Mannes, and Jack Gould. (JB)

THE TEACHERS GUIDE TO
media
AND METHODS

October 1967 Vol. 4, No. 2

COVER Seeing with new eyes. From a poster by the School of Visual Arts, 209 E. 23rd St., N.Y., N.Y.

The Teachers Guide to MEDIA & METHODS (formerly SCHOOL PAPERBACK JOURNAL) is published nine times per year September through May by Media & Methods Institute, Inc., 134 N. 13th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19107. Phone: (215) 564-5170. Subscription: $3 per year, $4 in Canada, $2 each for 20 or more to one school address. Single copy 40¢. Printed in U.S.A. by World Color Press. Controlled circulation postage paid at Sparta, Illinois.

Critics Out of Vidiots

by Ned Hoopes

The "now-generation" as television critics?

"In spite of a thousand narrow dogmatisms," said Henry James, there is "nothing in the world that anyone is under the least obligation to *like*." Kids need to be challenged to decide for themselves *what* it is they like and *why*. Rather than imposing their own value judgements, teachers should help kids discover their own critical faculties and concentrate on sharpening them.

A healthy atmosphere of trust can establish a climate for honest criticism in the classroom. Students on all levels are capable of reacting, interpreting and analyzing what they view on their home screens. Obviously, the "now-generation" responds to almost everything they see, hear and feel. Why not encourage these responses?

Gradually, kids can then be led to a point where they will be able to give reasons for their responses. As they learn to understand both themselves and the medium better, they will make their own qualitative distinctions.

At first, they do not need a critical grammar, nor do they need to know what professional television critics are saying. When a little boy tells his friend that an episode of *Tarzan* was "dumb and silly," he is taking the first step in the critical process.

In a casual sense, everyone who watches television is a critic. When he flips the channel selector from one network to another, he is expressing an opinion. Obviously, the more sensitive he becomes in his observations and the more skilled in expressing his opinions, the better he functions in the role of critic.

James Agee suggested that the *best* kind of criticism is nothing more than a stimulating conversation between friends. When a young person has seen a television program that either inspired or irritated him, he may want to talk, or even shout, about it. Let's give him a chance to do so.

Henry James, in speaking of literary criticism, suggested that "just in proportion as he reacts and reciprocates and penetrates, is the critic a valuable instrument." So with television criticism, if the student is to make a valuable contribution to an otherwise dull discussion, he must be stretched to make more and more perceptive comments about particular television programs which he watches.

After all, even amateur criticism is a kind of endeavor to find, to know, to love or to hate, to recommend or to warn against. Not only the best programs should be analyzed, interpreted and judged but all television experiences should be the subject for class critical discussions. By examining the imperfect and inferior programs as well as the excellent ones, the student may discover within himself insights sufficiently worthy to communicate to his classmates. Otherwise, these insights might remain concealed and untested.

As a student quickens his awareness, he will demand more of the medium and of himself. The effect, if not the prime purpose, of allowing the student to play the role of television critic is to magnify his absorption and enjoyment of all things that feed the mind. A heightened awareness of his responses to television can quicken his other mental demands. This, in turn, will lead him into more and more intellectually satisfying and stimulating experiences.

Helping a student to learn to react in some intelligent way to what he views on television and to reach out for reasons for his reactions will, hopefully, lead him further and further from easy grazing on television pastures and into an investigation of other products of our culture: books, magazines, newspapers, films. Television criticism then could become the very beginning step toward an education of his whole imaginative life.

By narrating his television-viewing adventures, the student has begun an intellectual journey that

will not end with graduation. Every television viewer, whether he is a student or a teacher, is of course selective. He has his own personal prejudices and subjective responses. He usually has ideas about what is good and bad and can often offer positive suggestions and alternatives. If he is to persuade others, however, the student will soon feel the need for finding ways to clearly and convincingly set forth the reasons why he considers a program successful or not.

It is at this point that he might become interested in professional television criticism—an intriguing and complicated phenomenon which deserves attention.

Most television criticism is circulated through newspapers, magazines, books; the term critic is used to cover many types of observers—even the person who is simply a columnist name-dropper. Not everyone who writes about television is particularly well-trained. The readers' favorite critic is usually the one whose observations agree with the readers' own views.

Mark Twain, in his autobiography, said, "The trade of critic is the most degraded of all trades." The intelligent, informed television critic—in the narrower literary sense of the word—requires experience, taste, sensitivity, and an understanding of the medium. The best critics have achieved their status on the basis of consistent performance.

Because television has not had enough time to establish traditions, there are fewer well-known and influential critics (in the narrower sense of the term) than in other fields of entertainment. Let us look in more detail at the various types of professional television criticism that does exist.

THE REPORTER OR REVIEWER

The majority of so-called television critics are in reality journalists who simply call attention to current programs and sometimes include comments or evaluations of them. Occasionally such writers review popular series as well as special offerings. They can, in some cases, give an added dimension to the viewers' own observations. For instance, Cleveland Amory in *TV Guide* makes provocative generalizations (such as calling *The Monkees* "the Beatles next door") which function more as pithy epigrams than as genuine criticism.

To evaluate a program, any writer has to describe truthfully what he saw from his own particular focus; in some cases this is rather limited. Many readers assume that professional television critics are more knowledgeable about the medium and more independent and creative in their interpretations than they really are. Most reviewers, in fact, are more often wrong than they are right.

Such reviewing in general, of course, has little in common with creative critical interpretation, but even the most superficial review can have a positive value for kids because it indicates that some kind of reaction to television, even a wrong-headed one, is desirable.

THE COLUMNIST

Because so many Americans are fascinated by the private lives of television personalities, dozens of television columnists dwell almost exclusively on the private behavior of celebrities. Although these columnists (or better, personality-peepers) generally make no effort to deal with matters of social policy or make any kind of artistic value judgements, there are some columnists who do more than satisfy the curiosity of star-snooping viewers.

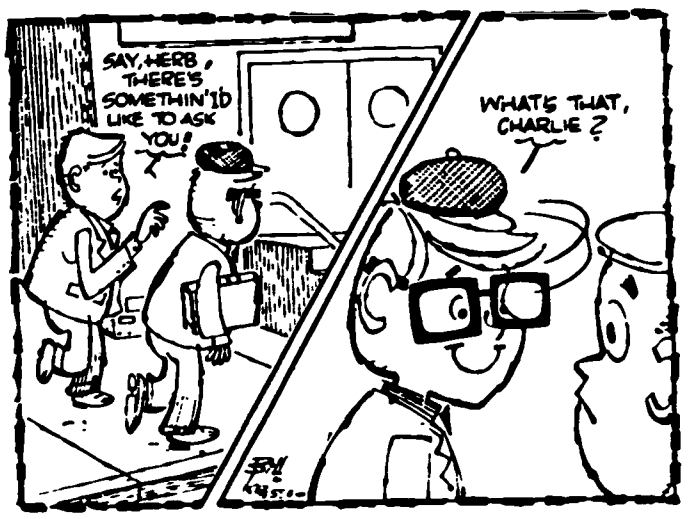
Harriet Van Horne, for instance, in "The Battle of TV's Midnight Millions," (*Look Magazine*, July 7, 1967) presents not only an intimate personal portrait of Johnny Carson but gives a provocative and informed analysis of the whole late-night show genre.

THE INTERPRETIVE CRITIC

"The critical sense is so far from frequent that it is absolutely rare, and the possession of the cluster of qualities that minister to it is one of the highest distinctions." (Henry James, again) He goes on to say that the skilled critic is "a torch-bearing outrider, an interpreter, a brother."

It is, of course, a difficult question to say exactly what the critic's job is. I.A. Richards, the distinguished philosopher of criticism, sees the process as one of "navigation." He says that the prime purpose and subject matter of criticism is to determine what is communicated, how it is done and what the worth is of what is communicated.

Interpretive television critics really fall into two somewhat overlapping categories. Beyond



calling attention to good programs and examining bad ones, they make aesthetic judgements and give sociological, psychological, legal and economic comments about the context in which television programs are created. Aesthetic critics usually are concerned primarily with the content of the program and its artistic merits or flaws. Such critics are rare because few of them really understand or take into account the unique qualities of television as a medium. Too many critics apply a literary tradition in their approach.

Television is not merely a carrier of film nor is it a visual re-creation of literature. It actually shapes its material by the special characteristics of its form. The small size of the screen, the intimacy and simplicity of its production, and the fact that it is shown in the home are all-important and distinguishing factors.

Although limited in number there are a few mature writers with the perspective necessary to interpret this comparatively new medium.

Three of the most important interpretive critics no longer appear on a regular basis—Gilbert Seldes, considered by some to be the most intelligent and daring critic of television aesthetics, Marya Mannes, who regularly stepped on the artistic toes of sensitive television producers, performers and executives in a brilliant, witty fashion when she served as critic for *The Reporter*, and John Crosby, who wrote analytical, though sometimes intuitive, criticism for the now defunct *New York Herald Tribune*.

Two other influential critics, still actively engaged in appraising TV performances, appear on a more regular basis—Robert Lewis Shayon, in *The Saturday Review*, and Jack Gould, in *The New York Times*.

Shayon, who combines practical experience in television with considerable writing skill, often talks about particular production problems. In his May 26, 1967, review of *The Crucible*, for example, he pointed out how the play's director, Alex Segal, had overlooked an important television characteristic as he tried to create a feeling of mounting panic. "Crowded scenes and hysterical people" he said, "can be handled successfully in *mis-en-scene* in the theatre; but for the small colored television tube it was too cluttered, too frenetic."

As an opinion-maker and a force within the industry, Jack Gould is, perhaps, the most successful television critic. A CBS executive confessed to me that the whole concept behind the premier production of *CBS Playhouse* last year was designed with Gould in mind. They felt that if the television critic liked *The Final War of Olly Winter*, the whole series would get the sponsorship it needed. It worked!

It was after Gould had called attention to the fact that no station in New York City was giving prolonged coverage to the United Nations debates that systematic coverage began.

The whole point of Gould's criticism is generally to elucidate and specify the conditions under which television operates. Alert broadcasters are highly responsive to his social criticism. Indeed, it was his 1966 review of the production of *Death of a Salesman* that was partially responsible for the revival of significant drama on all three networks.

His voice is also heard in the Madison Avenue offices of advertising agencies. When he suggested that the "advertising restraint" shown by the sponsors of the production of *Glass Menagerie* should set the pattern for all advertisers, sensitive account executives listened. More and more of them are considering Gould's idea of "civilized commercial circumstances."

Not so well-known to the general public but nevertheless powerful with the networks are Les Brown and George Rosen who both write for *Variety*—the *Farmer's Almanac* of the entertainment world. Important local critics also have a strong voice in determining tastes and patterns of programing for their community.

Students need to recognize the socio-legal-economic context of television and take it into account when they are making judgements about what should be and can be done. Critics who understand this context can help them as they ponder important questions, policy and procedure.

Recently, *Newsweek* and *Time* have eliminated their television columns because they consider the medium unworthy of serious critical attention. It would be a mistake, however, for teachers to follow suit. It has long been a recognized obligation within the schools to help children become literate in print. Now, it is just as important to help them become literate about other media.

Literacy is a print concept; a similar process exists for the visual media, too. Children nurtured on television in our society learn at a very early age, largely by themselves, to associate pictures with the objects they represent. But they need formal assistance in learning to interpret, dissect and analyze what they see. In other words, they need to become critical toward television and movies.

In order to help kids sharpen their critical faculties toward television, they should watch particular programs and then write about and discuss them in class. They should be encouraged to write columns of media criticisms for their school newspapers. They can also read and agree or argue with the professional critics. They can do research on the context of our public media. There are any number of approaches that teachers can take in developing a critical skill toward television.

One student told me a joke which contains new layers of meaning about criticism for our students. It seems a man went to his neighbor's house to watch a special dramatic production of a famous book. When the program was finished, he was surprised. The dog, who had been lying on the floor in front of the television set, suddenly started clapping his paws. Startled the guest turned to his host: "That's amazing! Your dog is clapping for that television program."

"Yes, it is rather surprising. He didn't enjoy the book at all."